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In contrast to the kind of leisurely climate that nurtured such creative artists of the past as the Brontes or Fanny Burney, today's adolescents exist in a frantic academic and social whirl in which their only leisure is often "a negative inertia against planned activity." To develop these students' potential as creative individuals and as social beings, English teaching must be liberated from its typically fixed curricular "subject" approach. Emphasis must be placed, instead, on an "activity" approach which (1) relates contemporary literature and history to the students' level of experience, (2) draws instructional materials from the students' own everyday speech patterns, (3) uses mass media materials as a major language source and as a revelation of life, and (4) gives attention to talking and listening experiences and to reading for pleasure in a receptive, non-critical classroom atmosphere. (JB)

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The mass media—moving pictures, radio, television—not only present a great deal of narrative and drama but typify the "communications revolution" that can hardly be ignored by teachers of language and literature. . . . For English teachers the plainest implication of this change is the need of giving more attention to talking and listening.
(H. J. Muller, *The Uses of English*)

A Creative Climate for English Teaching

Dorothy Livesay

"Sense and Sensibility" in English teaching? Or should my theme be "Pride and Prejudice"? In all deference to the creative powers of Jane Austen the truth is that she, like her fellow women novelists Fanny Burney and the Brontes, was educated without benefit of secondary schooling; and certainly without benefit of a course in "Creative English." The same situation applies to Canada's Strickland sisters, Catherine Parr Traill and Susannah Moodie, and of the more contemporary novelist, Mazo de la Roche. These women writers grew up at home, surrounded by books and with the leisure to read them. Their imagination had free play and they perfected their style by trial and error.

"Ah *but,*" the reader will retort, "these were women of genius. The education that fostered them would scarcely be of help to the average child." That is precisely the point I wish to make in this paper. For, a consideration of some of the elements contributing to that old-fashioned growing-up may throw light on certain problems of English teaching that are as yet unsolved. In an age when we expect every child to be creative we may well ask: what sort of climate are we providing for such growth?

Fanny Burney, for example, had a narrow and high browsing ground: her father's library.

When the Doctor was at home he was in his study, and his delight in books old and new and his literary industry were not lost on the little mime . . . who had formed her own system of education. She never found loneliness or leisure irksome when she, too, could read and scribble. These years are of no little importance in the development of Fanny Burney's mind. In her early teens she read a

large number of books current in her day from which she imbibed the stock ethical ideas of her society, ideas that she later transposed 'put into action' in her novels and plays in a way that not even Richardson had managed before her.

And Mrs. Traill recalled, in her old age, the joys of learning at home, at Stowe House in Suffolk:

There was an old-fashioned cuckoo clock in the lower hall in the Stowe House. When the cuckoo called the hour of ten, the young folks went to the study, where their father and mother were ready for them. The three elder sisters make their curtseys as they took their places at the table with slates and copies ready set, and their reading and spelling books and maps all in due order. The younger children went to their mother, where books, needles, thimbles and work lay ready for them. At three years of age the education of these little children had commenced under the dear mother's care, and she was as strict with her infant class as the father was with the older ones. There must be no noise, no talking, no crying—and disobedience was punished in the very youngest child . . . Yet we were as lively and happy as many other children who have every indulgence and are allowed to have their own way unchecked.

The writer goes on to tell that her father "when off duty"—as he called his teaching hours—"could not have been kinder or more loving." And the mother delighted her children by telling fairy stories, "or she would sing and recite old ballads, so ancient that not one could be found in the oldest publication ever met with in print."

Mazo de la Roche had the same sort of "English" background though she grew up, in the late eighties, in small Ontario towns. She gives a glimpse of her education in the autobiography, *Ringing the Changes:*

Often my father and I read the same book at the same time, his six foot three extended in an easy chair, my growing length draped against his chest . . . So I remember reading The White Company *. . .* Allen Quatermain *by Rider Haggard . . . I think it was in those days, when we first began to read together that the bond between my father and me strengthened into a deep understanding.*

Both her parents were great "reader-alouders" and in that way she was introduced to Shakespeare's plays and the novels of Dickens.

Perhaps enough has been said to show that a special kind of nurture encouraged and allowed certain middle-class children to be readers and writers, at least until World War I changed the patterns of living. After that the whole picture changed focus: away flew the old order of society, the deck chairs, the tête-à-tête conversations, the leisure to read. In contrast, the growing-climate of the adolescent today is conformist—so "set" that it is hard not to be stereotyped when describing it. No longer do many children absorb the mother tongue through directed dialogue, discussion at the dinner-table, books from the shelf; few have the opportunity to hike up to the attic and sit alone and be quiet, drawing or writing into the night for as long as the candle allows. Teenagers are "go-go",

forever on the move. All too often the leisure they enjoy is a kind of negative inertia against planned activity, conscious communication. The atmosphere in a coffee-house or jazz centre is one of refusal to react. Such painting or poetry as comes out of it is spontaneous and associative: a catharsis, no doubt; but often little more.

At school also the atmosphere is "go-go" from class to class, activity to activity. Study is sandwiched into this when examinations loom; but serious reading for pleasure is almost a lost art. Instead students read as if to drug themselves: crime and science fiction; motor mechanics; movieland romances. In view of this changed scene it is legitimate to ask in what way the English program in secondary schools can at once relate to the world of the teenager and also make that world more meaningful.

I propose to tackle this question obliquely, from three directions: the historical, the psychological and the sociological. Historically we would do well to remind ourselves that "English" has not always been a classroom or "course" study. M. M. Lewis, in *The Importance of Illiteracy*, points out that Latin, not English, was the original mark of an educated gentleman: "with the decline of the functional value of Latin as a means of communication, the study of the language in schools came to be valued more and more because of its association with a cultured and leisured élite. This association has now in some measure been transferred to English." By 1921, when George Sampson first published his book *English for the English*, the conception of English as a special curriculum subject had taken root. But Sampson was amongst the first to ask whether this was the best possible way of appreciating the Mother Tongue.

What do we mean by "English"? The word itself is deceptively ambiguous. We use it to mean a teachable and examinable subject—an advanced course subject in the secondary schools, an honours subject at the universities. But we must never forget that English is something vastly greater than that. It includes and transcends all subjects. It is for the English people the whole means of expression, the attainment of which makes them articulate and intelligible human beings, able to inherit the past, possess the present and to confront the future.

And about the lesson in English Sampson concludes, "it is not merely one occasion for the inculcation of knowledge; it is a part of the child's initiation into the life of man."

In the twenties, the emphasis on the importance of English began to infiltrate the primary school program in both England and North America. The nursery school movement, with its appeal for the development of the whole child, was carried forward into elementary education, with the result that today, in junior schools in Great Britain it is possible to observe "activity" lessons where every subject is integrated with the English program. Arithmetic becomes a tool used in the buying and selling of goods in a shop, of communication in action. Science is a project for discovering the world of things in relation to the world of words. History becomes social studies, intimately tied through language to man's interrelationships. English itself is not taught "head on" but as a natural part of experience in play, drama, mime and art—particularly at the oral and aural levels.

And freedom in the classroom is not given for freedom's sake, but as a means towards self-control. Such is the picture in some of the progressive nursery and elementary schools.

But after this liberating experience, what a change when children leave for the junior high schools, at about the age of twelve! The picture is reversed. Too often (at least in Canada) English becomes a 'subject' to be stuffed willy-nilly into adolescents' heads. There exist, even in 1968, too many classrooms where English is a grind of grammar, of set compositions liberally marked with red pencil, of *Ancient Mariners* memorized for tests. Again, M. M. Lewis has a relevant comment:

> *This means that much of what passes for the teaching of English is out of date. The pattern of communication of our day cannot be satisfied by the maintenance of a pattern of education fashioned to satisfy the needs of the past. The emphasis upon the written word, the study of grammar, the comprehension and appreciation of 'literature' —certainly none of these can without danger be excluded from modern education in the mother tongue. But the manner in which they are approached is often irrelevant in that it may contribute little or nothing to the basic ability to communicate. It is not too harsh to say that the teaching of English may even hinder the mastery of communication by diverting the time, energy and attention of the pupil from the business of learning how to make himself understood and how best to understand what others have to say to him.*
> (The Importance of Illiteracy, p. 174)

The point, I think, lies in those words, "the teaching of English may even *hinder* the mastery of education." Ideas handed down from the past, says Martin Buber, constitute education by *compulsion*. He would establish a different aim, *communion*. And surely it is with this aspect, communion between man and man, that education in English should deal? An educator from New Zealand, G. W. Parkyn, offers evidence from his experience with students of English at the university level. Observers of the New Zealand scene, he says, have remarked "our failure to develop a distinctive culture of the spirit . . . and several . . . have considered that our schools must bear some responsibility for our cultural mediocrity and our tendency to discourage intellectual inquiry and adventures of the spirit." This statement would certainly have relevance for the Canadian scene. And in England practices condemned in the *Norwood Report* of 1943 are still prevalent in Grammar Schools. One of its main recommendations—the abolishing of examinations in literature, which tighten rather than liberate the English program—has not been put into force in England. If then the *Norwood Report* was not forceful enough, what other arguments might yet be brought to bear? There is, I believe, some psychological and sociological evidence that might prove helpful.

As early as 1926, at a conference on *The Development of the Creative Powers of the Child,* Martin Buber laid down an outline which has become the basis for much psychological and philosophical research in education. He said: "Everyone is elementally endowed with the basic powers of the arts, with that of drawing, for instance, or that of music; these powers have to be developed, and the

education of the whole person is to be built up on them as on the natural activity of the self." The axiom, however, is still far from being accepted by all educators. In his book, *Thinking and Imagination*, Peter McKellar states:

Unfortunately for the occurrence of creative thought, higher education often seems to encourage an attitude, which may become habitual—of rejection rather than receptivity towards the creative thought of others.

To illustrate the point McKellar quotes from the findings of the American psychologist, L. L. Thurstone:

He distinguishes between two opposing types of student, the one who is merely critical and the one who is possessed of creative talent. The first type, when confronted with a new idea, will react to it in a distinctively negative way. By clear, logical thinking he may soon be able to show that the idea is wrong or that the plan is unworkable. The second type of student will react differently to the idea; he lays to it, and speculates what the implications might be if they could be demonstrated. Because of the novelty of the proposal his impulse is to wish it could be shown to be true.

McKellar lays down certain conditions for creativity which seem to have a bearing on classroom teaching. He lists: an absence of destructive criticism and a receptivity to old and new ideas; 'withholding judgment'; a critical openness—a questioning attitude; and a willingness, after preliminary, abstract thinking, to let the unconscious go to work on the concrete level of imagery. His concept of learning is similar to Buber's proposal of *education as dialogue*. Marjorie Hourd makes a like plea for teaching that draws from the child not "expected feelings" but "genuine feeling" which relates the thing perceived to personal experience.

What it all adds up to is the liberation of the English program from fixed and rigorous "subject" teaching, and orientation instead to the activity approach used in elementary schools. For those still sceptical of the liberating value of such a step, psychological evidence suggests that children's modes of thinking can be strengthened through creative activities. Martin Buber expressed this view in these simple terms:

The child, putting things together, learns much that he can learn in no other way. In making something he gets to know its possibility, its origin and structure and connections, in a way he cannot learn by observation.

This is supported by the evidence of Eunice Belbin, who, in a study on "the effects of propaganda on recall, recognition and behaviour", found, as a result of three separate experiments, that learning may be two kinds: learning for purposes of recall, and learning to influence behaviour. The evidence is compelling. Learning by rote, learning, that is, for purposes of recall (such as for examinations) results in a dead end: behaviour is not changed. But where material is learned by means of manipulation, participation, experience, it may not indeed

be so easily recalled (again for purposes of examination), but it is *acted upon*. That is, the learning has been integrated into the personality of the student and can be made use of in his behaviour patterns. Learning by rote may rigidly condition future methods of learning and may actually inhibit the uses to which new learning may be put.

Is this merely grist to the mill of Dewey's notions on educational process? Much more research is certainly required and perhaps much more trial and error in the classroom before this approach can be considered the only valid one. However, the Nuffield Foundation's report on *Television and the Child*, released in 1959, provides additional evidence.

> *Of any effects studied one of the most relevant to our discussion was the effect of television on children's learning processes. Although, aside from the broadening of reading tastes, television was found to have no greater educational superiority than reading and listening taken by themselves, nonetheless one significant result appeared from tests on learning and retention of knowledge. It was found that a child man gain valuable knowledge from programs other than those that are deliberately instructional. Learning from television is incidental to being amused or excited . . . incidents accumulate in time and are remembered.*

The report emphasizes that "Many dramatic productions . . . may contain informative detail in plots and settings which could give viewers an advantage over their 'controls'—a process of incidental learning seems to be at work which is assisted by the dramatic impact of the program as a whole." Further studies made by Kay and Niam on "the immediate memory of a broadcast program" show that a dramatized lesson may make a definite, more permanent impact on the listener. After testing children's comprehension of three specific programs they reported that a dramatized information program was able to bring about subtle changes in a child's attitude, even when he knew the 'plain facts' beforehand.

The implications of this sort of investigation are far-reaching for education, and especially for the teaching of the mother tongue. If drama can have such telling effect, it might be used both destructively and constructively. Thus, good television drama in the school needs to be presented frequently, if only to counteract crime drama on the commercial networks. But the implications go deeper: they suggest that a new avenue for learning English should be explored, using what T. J. Moreno calls 'improvisation' and 'psycho-drama' to call forth language and creative thought. Indeed, by working more closely with psychologists, schools may discover a new dynamic of learning. And no subject will be more enriched than will English, the tool of thinking.

It is suggested, then, that by scutinizing the teaching of English in the light of psychological experiments we may come to appreciate new ways of reaching the child's potential *as an individual*. But beyond this lies another step: that of developing the child *as a social being*. By examining the teaching of English in relation to its sociological environment we may be better able to understand the challenge. For

the adolescent should be regarded as an unformed mind, capable of being trained not to submit blindly to propaganda and mass media but to grow towards selectivity, discrimination and taste.

"What!" teachers will exclaim. "In view of the pressure of comics, radio, television, films, tabloid newspapers and slang, do you suggest that the school should do anything other than battle these influences to the death?" My reply would be that the school cannot do battle with society. It should find an entry rather than erecting a wall. Those who believe that the answer to pressures of mass media would be to intensify the rarification of the English program—"Give them what they will never get at home"—are finding that there is *no exit* by that door. The youngsters are bored, or sceptical, or cynical. They want to see how their lives relate to literature. They want not a block, but an open vista.

How are we, as teachers, to create that life-line? By shutting the door on our society with its barrage of messages? Surely, instead of wringing our hands over the abuse of mass media, a better answer lies in learning how to make use of all the modern techniques of communication. For instance, by bringing newspapers into the classroom some high school teachers in Vancouver are (perhaps unwittingly) following the lead of M. M. Lewis, in England. The newspaper, he claims, is a communication device which has not been effectively mastered. It has run out of hand and is allowed "to darken counsel instead of giving accurate information." To master this medium for the social good he advocates not state control but "social control". There is, he believes, only one way to improve the newspaper—by teaching the coming generation to understand its strengths and weaknesses. "This means that the newspaper should be one of the centres of information both in school and in the adult education that follows schooling. It might take a generation to achieve a new sort of newspaper, but it could be done if the schools took the crusade seriously, *now*."

What about the other mass media? Coming to our society at a later stage than the newspaper, they are already under *social or state* control. But these mass media may also be regarded, as the book has been, as an essential tool of education. Films, radio broadcasts and television are not merely aids to teaching; they are human and linguistic resources. How can they best be used in the English program? At a panel discussion in London on the role of film and television as *Visual Persuaders*, it was pointed out that teacher training colleges have not yet assumed full responsibility for tackling the way to incorporate these media into the classroom. In Canada some universities and high schools are initiating programs, such as teaching a survey course in English Literature, largely by means of records, tape recordings and films. Newspapers are read aloud and discussed for a comparison of their educational slant, news space and space devoted to advertising. Advertising in itself may be a most fruitful source of discussion in the English class, enabling pupils to discriminate between informative and persuasive advertising. There are now enough books and magazine articles available on this topic to be used for debate and example; and practice in writing advertising is certainly a possibility for the English class.

To conclude the argument: once teachers accept the view that new elements must be linked with traditional components of education in

the mother tongue without dichotomy, without scepticism, then it should not be difficult to persuade the public also. Students will enjoy the classroom more positively if its activities are bound up with their daily lives. Speech, first learned in the family, then expanded through radio and television, through films and pictures and books, speech in its many-colored dressings, is the essential tool in the art of living, whether in school or out. By encouraging its use teachers need not fear the combination of speech with the "seen" image. There is both educational and special evidence to show that "the image reinforces the word." Marshall McLuhan extended this idea even further when he said recently in Toronto (in relation to Pop Art), "One of the peculiar results of repeating a pictorial image is to get something quite different—a kind of mythic or symbolic form." Language also is symbolic: combined with the visual image it can create an intensified experience, especially for children who have difficulties in their command of language. There is no indication that pictures will replace language; but language may be enhanced when integrated with images.

Perhaps enough has been said to indicate what the teaching of the mother tongue could be like in the contemporary world. First we need a teacher for whom literature is a revelation of life, and who sees the necessity of relating it to the students' level of experience. Next, we need an attitude which uses the students' everyday speech patterns to reveal the structural backbone of English: less formal grammar and more enjoyment of words, idioms, slang—a study of language, in short, so related to life that the learning motivation of "tests" is no longer necessary. Lastly, especially in Canada, we need the widest possible search for texts drawn from our own literature and history; and a wise use of current weeklies and journals, public affairs programs and films. All of these procedures might be used with children at any level, in any secondary stream. If, in addition, the more gifted children were given extra study periods for research on their own—that solitude, that leisure which we have seen to be essential for imaginative growth—with no need to feel the pressure of gulping down literature from the examination trough, the result might be surprisingly rewarding. We might have not merely more writers, but better writers. More important still, we might have a generation that knows how to use its leisure creatively.